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RESPONSIVE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED HOUSEHOLDS (REACH) 2

FY2016 Q3 Quarterly Report

FIRST IMPLEMENTING QUARTER

Program Goal and Objectives

With support from USAID/Food for Peace, the Mercy Corps' expanded *Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict-affected Households* (REACH 2) project will target 7,500 of the most vulnerable households in at least three LGAs in southern Borno over a period of 12 months. This will enable Mercy Corps to provide immediate relief to address vulnerable households' food security needs, as well as stabilize support throughout the year as IDPs and host families begin to rebuild their livelihood capacity.

The goal of REACH 2 continues to be *to enhance food security for IDP and host households in conflict affected parts of North East Nigeria*. REACH 2 will distribute monthly vouchers to allow 7,500 households for a period of 8 months to access food through existing market actors, to meet their own urgent needs, while supporting the rapid recovery of small businesses in the food market chain.

Mercy Corps will also include a community infrastructure component, by asking participating households to contribute to Cash for Work (CfW) projects in order to earn wages in line with local wage and labor laws. Specific CfW projects will be selected by recipient communities, with practices in place to ensure the input, needs and perspectives of all community members, including women, men, and youth, IDPs, and host families. Communities will be prioritized based on the importance of increasing host community acceptance of the burden of hosting IDPs, or in areas of return where conflict damaged buildings and other infrastructure are in critical need of reconstruction.

Mercy Corps will put a special focus on ensuring that all components are nutrition-sensitive by incorporating key nutrition messages throughout project activities. Specifically, REACH 2 will take an active role in promoting nutritional awareness in targeted areas by developing and deploying information, education and communication (IEC) messages and materials.

General: Start-up Activities

The main activities this quarter were focused on the startup of REACH 2 program activities. These activities are described in the sections below, followed by modality-specific startup activities.

Start-up: Biu Local Government Area (LGA)

The REACH 2 program had its external kickoff meeting on May 7, 2016 in Biu, and was attended by the Chairman of Biu LGA as well as three district and four ward heads (traditional leaders) and community leaders. Also in attendance were local government heads of the departments of Works, Nutrition, Social Welfare and Primary Health Care, and key stakeholders, such as market leaders and the Coordinator of Nigerian Red Cross. The kickoff meeting outlined the program purpose, discussed how beneficiaries would be identified, and provided a venue for leaders to input their ideas into the program. The kickoff meeting was an initial step to gain the support of these leaders for the lifetime of the program.

With the goal of targeting the most vulnerable populations, REACH 2 identified six communities with a high concentration of IDPs (Yawi, Zarawuyaku, Galdimare, Sulumtha, Dugja, and Miringa) and set up community relief committees (CRCs) in each community, with a total membership of 59 people. The membership of the CRCs was developed in close coordination with traditional leadership.

The CRCs nominated community volunteer candidates. Mercy Corps then interviewed the candidates and 16 were selected. These community volunteers will be engaged primarily to assist Mercy Corps in the tasks related to community outreach. These tasks include beneficiary registration; sensitization and mobilization; assistance in beneficiary training; voucher distribution and voucher transaction monitoring. All volunteers have a contract outlining expectations with Mercy Corps, and they are provided a small stipend to cover transport and related expenses. Mercy Corps provides capacity building opportunities for the community volunteers who are interested in bettering their communities as well as themselves. The community volunteers received an orientation and training which included “Do no harm” and humanitarian principles, as well as Mercy Corps community operational modality and work ethics. They also received training on how to register beneficiaries using a mobile data collection process.

Start-up: Hawul LGA

Following a similar process to that of Biu, the kickoff meeting in Hawul took place in Azare on June 8, 2016. In attendance were the district and ward heads of the area, directors of Primary Health Care, Nutrition and Planning for Hawul local government, and the Acting Chairman of Hawul local government who is also the local government Secretary. In addition, women leaders, religious leaders and market leaders attended the kickoff meeting. This meeting introduced the program and its objectives and established common understanding of how beneficiaries will be identified.

REACH 2 identified five communities in Hawul with a high concentration of IDPs (Sakwa, Shafa, Kwajafa, Bilingwi and Pama). Each community also has a CRC that was developed in partnership with traditional leadership, made up of 35 leaders in total. The concentration of IDPs in these communities will be validated during the beneficiary registration process.

The CRCs nominated community volunteer candidates who were interviewed by Mercy Corps. Fifteen were selected for training which took place in the following reporting period.

Registration

In preparation for beneficiary registration, REACH 2 reviewed the beneficiary registration process of its previous programs to understand which areas could be improved. Leveraging the increased capacity and efficiency that our electronic platform brings to Mercy Corps programs, REACH 2 transitioned from a manual paper registration process to an electronic platform that will also be used to manage the cash transfers and electronic vouchers that will be implemented under REACH 2. This transition will allow the program to more accurately collect baseline data, incorporate learnings from real-time data collection, and ultimately better measure the effectiveness of the program.

In addition to changing the platform, REACH 2 also enhanced the effectiveness of the tool by developing a built-in vulnerability scoring mechanism. The ability to reach the most vulnerable populations is a consistent priority for Mercy Corps, and it begins with the beneficiary registration tool. Based on vulnerability criteria developed after careful analysis of Mercy Corps' as well as peer organizations' best practices, REACH 2 developed a framework of vulnerability criteria as well as a survey tool to assess household vulnerability. Criteria include household size, coping strategies index, dietary diversity, demographic information on head of household, and protection issues, among others. The tool was developed in close coordination with Action Against Hunger.

Coordination

Mercy Corps coordinates closely with other international NGOs. Mercy Corps is in discussion with Save the Children, which has plans to work in Biu and intervene in the food security, child protection, and WASH sectors. Mercy Corps has been coordinating with ICRC since May 2016 to provide support in Biu, Hawul, and Damboa LGAs. A similar discussion is ongoing with the Nigerian Red Cross, which has been managing two IDP camps in Biu and has maintained records of IDPs in the region. Such coordination activities ensure that we are in a position to share information that we have gathered, gain other sources of information, and leverage the resources of other NGOs.

Mercy Corps attended a coordination meeting in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, with a focus on understanding the current state of southern Borno. During this meeting, Mercy Corps took the lead in outlining the context and issues in the region. The minutes of the meeting were compiled and shared by UN OCHA as a bulletin outlining the situation analysis of the area.

Mercy Corps' Nigeria Country Director visited Biu and Hawaul LGAs to meet with government representatives, as well as the Emir of Biu (traditional leader), as part of the start-up process. This courtesy visit also demonstrated the strength of REACH 2's commitment in the area.

Unconditional Cash Food Vouchers

Vendor Enrollment

REACH 2 signed contracts with 33 vendors in Biu who have the capacity and willingness to participate in the intervention. Mercy Corps sought applications from vendors who were interested in participating in REACH 2, a process initiated during the kickoff meetings detailed above. Following the kickoff, a separate meeting was held with vendors who had expressed interest in joining the program. During this meeting, an expression of interest form was circulated, and vendors were asked to return these forms to Mercy Corps. This survey form identified the capacity of each business to deliver needed basket of goods in the community. Traders then signed contracts with Mercy Corps agreeing to the requirements of the program and having demonstrated the ability to stock their shops with the agreed commodities..

Using a similar process, six vendors in Miringa community had initially expressed interest but chose to withdraw. Most of these vendors were not comfortable supplying commodities to program beneficiaries and receiving payments afterwards. The vendors preferred to be provided with capital first to stock their shops. REACH 2 staff are currently seeking to identify new vendors for Miringa, or other means to serve Miringa beneficiaries. Possible ways to address a lack of vendors include hosting fairs at which vendors from larger communities would travel to serve more remote areas, providing transport allowances to beneficiaries in remote areas, and facilitating relationships between high-capacity vendors in larger communities with lower-capacity vendors in rural areas.

Mercy Corps has experienced a similar reaction in other program areas that were new to the voucher modality. However, in the Mercy Corps experience, as vendors see other vendors get payments following distributions to program beneficiaries, the number of interested vendors generally increases. Mercy Corps will be open to including additional vendors in Miringa and other target communities to expand the network of vendors who can support program beneficiaries.

Price Monitoring

REACH 2 examined existing price trends from previous Mercy Corps programs for staple foods. Using a food basket calculator initiated by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which defines a food basket with enough calories, fat and protein as per the Sphere standards, Mercy Corps had an initial food basket price of 12,800 NGN. Initially planning for a voucher that covers 75% of the cost of this food basket, the initial voucher value was set at 9,600 NGN.

Price monitoring activities commenced in southern Borno at the beginning of May where it was immediately apparent that prices have drastically shifted. Based on an assessment in the main market, REACH 2 learned that the price of commodities was on the high side even before the fasting period of Ramadan (June 6 - July 6), during which prices normally increase. Price monitoring activities in May show that the food basket price was 24,041 NGN, signifying a 87.82% increase in prices as compared to the initial estimated food basket price. In June, the food basket price was monitored in both the first half and the second half of the month for which the average was 22,308 NGN, which is a 74.28% increase as compared to the initial food basket but a 7.21% decrease as compared to May's food basket price. Initial finds suggest that food prices have increased again in July, especially with the end of Ramadan approaching.

Further analysis will be conducted as additional months of data are completed. With the electronic platform of REACH 2, the program will be able to respond in real time to price increases on an as-needed basis.

Cash for Work

Implementation of the cash for work component of REACH 2 will build off the startup activities detailed above, as well as the beneficiary registration process that will continue in the next reporting period. Additional implementation of cash transfer activities will be detailed in the next report.

Complementary Food Security Services

Health Facility Mapping

REACH 2 has conducted a mapping of health facilities offering the community management acute malnutrition (CMAM) program. Nine CMAM centers were identified in Biu and Hawul LGAs. Only the General Hospital in Biu is offering stabilization services for Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) cases while the CMAM centers can manage Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) cases. Additional assessment will be conducted in the following reporting period to better understand the health facilities capacities to determine to what extent referrals can be made.

Women's Groups

REACH 2 developed an action plan around how to utilize women's groups in its area of focus to address food security issues. REACH 2 intends to form a mothers' support group in each community which will include women benefiting from the food voucher distribution.

The mothers' support groups will be trained on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), Hygiene and Gender-based Violence challenges. They are expected to carry out sensitization to other women during gatherings such as naming ceremonies and marriages, among others. They will be provided with tools to record the number of women sensitized using IEC material provided by REACH 2. In addition, a practical session on infant food preparation will also be undertaken to teach women how to prepare nutritious meals using local food items. The groups will be expected to make referrals of MAM and SAM cases to the appropriate health facility.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

- The average poverty index in Nigeria is 46%, with the north east having over 76% of its inhabitants living below the poverty line. The situation is even worse in the conflict-affected areas. While much focus of humanitarian assistance has been on IDPs, it is important to note that the host communities that have welcomed the IDPs are also in need of additional support. This validates the need for our beneficiary target of 80% IDPs and 20% host communities.
- The first kickoff meeting in Biu helped in getting the initial support of the community leaders. However, continued efforts will be needed as the program progresses. Beneficiary registration and distributions will be tests to Mercy Corps' relationships within the community, so the team will continue to be aware of how it can strengthen these relationships in the future.
- The beneficiary registration process with its built-in vulnerability checklist will be more extensive than previous registration processes used. This will require additional training of our staff, volunteers and potentially enumerators who may be needed. Because the process will be moved to an electronic platform, even more reinforcement and training may be needed, for which the team will be prepared.
- Because the beneficiary registration will take more time from households and because registration does not signify guaranteed support, the team will need to identify a means to screen potential beneficiaries households prior to starting registering. A screening process should ensure that beneficiaries meet basic vulnerability criteria.
- Mercy Corps emphasized recruiting staff from southern Borno. These efforts were appreciated by the communities and their leadership, creating goodwill between Mercy Corps and the greater community.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):

Initial activities under M&E focused on food price monitoring, as detailed above, as well as incorporation of vulnerability criteria into the beneficiary registration process, testing this process and preparing the team for utilizing the process. In addition, the M&E team focused on preparation for the baseline assessment, including drafting baseline tools, identifying an appropriate baseline consultant and drafting the overall M&E plan.

The M&E team was also trained on the use of Ona Systems to code surveys into mobile data collection tools and manage the collected data. These activities carefully built upon the lessons learned from the initial REACH 1 endline survey, lessons learned and best practices.

REACH 2 will report on the agreed upon indicators starting in the next reporting period following this initial period of start-up.

Planned Activities for FY2016 Q4

ACTIVITY	MAIN ACTIVITIES
Start Up Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Continuation of volunteer training in all LGAs of focus2. Kickoff meeting in Kwaya Kusar LGA, followed by CRC

	<p>formation and volunteer recruitment/training</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Beneficiary registration in all LGAs and communities of focus
Unconditional Cash Vouchers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Beneficiary selection based on vulnerability criteria Prepare smart cards used on the electronic platform Use price monitoring information to adjust value of basket price, as needed Develop and implement training plan for beneficiaries on the use of smart cards and other relevant information
Cash for Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Beneficiary selection based on vulnerability criteria Identification of projects needed within each community of focus, in close partnership with community leadership based on specific criteria Development of project-specific budgets and specifications for procurement of materials
Nutrition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Define behavioral change strategy, how nutrition, WASH and other key messages will be integrated into other program interventions Utilize monthly beneficiary food purchase records to identify key nutrition messages Provide nutrition and WASH IEC materials and trainings to vendors and other key partners
M & E	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Continued price monitoring Finalization of M&E plan, including baseline tools Baseline data collection, analysis and report